

## The 1902 Campaign

With the nomination safely secured, Norris was compelled by illness to take to his bed and was not fully recovered until the third week in July. He then began setting his political house in order for the campaign.

One of his first statements was that he would assist no candidate in securing his judicial post. If he and the Republican candidate for governor, John H. Mickey, were both elected, Norris pledged to resign his judgeship after Mickey's inauguration, thereby allowing the new governor to name his successor. If the incumbent governor, Ezra P. Savage, were elected, Norris promised to resign on January 1, 1903, thereby allowing Savage to appoint a district judge.<sup>1</sup> By taking this stand on the matter of his successor, Norris hoped to avoid losing the support of aspirants to his post.

In an attempt to anticipate the issue of the disputed 1895 election, Republican newspapers presented their readers with affidavits, notably those written by D. T. Welty, explaining Norris' position. The 1895 election was an old issue and had not been successfully used against him in the past. Norris had no reason to believe that it could be so used at this time.

Early in the campaign, Norris made another decision that helped avoid possible pitfalls. He refused to endorse anyone for a federal position, particularly postmaster candidates. He avoided local political quarrels and disputes and notified all who sought his endorsement that he would make no effort along these lines until after the election.<sup>2</sup> However, Norris could not avoid requests for railroad passes. Burlington officials claimed that during the summer months so many people went off on vacation to the Colorado Rockies they thought it advisable to curtail free transportation. Despite this proscription Norris was able, when he thought it necessary to obtain transportation for individuals who might be of help in his campaign.<sup>3</sup>

The transportation problem became more difficult because some local Republican leaders made commitments which Norris could turn

down only at the risk of losing votes. One wrote requesting transportation for a "Catholic pop" who promised to deliver at least six votes "out of his own church." Another made a similar request for a Populist who promised to work among the German farmers in Webster County. This same politician also urged Norris to provide transportation for a Populist saloonkeeper in Red Cloud who could do much good among his Bohemian countrymen. In one instance, a committee member was unable to obtain a pass for a Scandinavian leader in his county and purchased railroad tickets out of his own pocket, explaining that it "wouldn't do to lose him." These free passes represented a commitment which could pay off in votes on election day.<sup>4</sup>

Though Norris later had every reason to be grateful to Senator C. H. Dietrich, and possibly owed his election to the senator's efforts, at the outset he thought Dietrich was indirectly doing him harm. Dietrich desired to remove a deputy revenue collector from his post. Norris thought that such a change during the campaign would be "a very bad political move," since the collector was a Union veteran and a hard worker for the Republican party. Norris asked G. W. Holdrege of the Burlington and Missouri to persuade the senator to retain the official at least until after the election.<sup>5</sup>

If Norris was disturbed or annoyed with Senator Dietrich in this instance, he kept the grievance to himself. He never mentioned it again in his correspondence. And as the campaign progressed he repeatedly sought the senator's services, which were always forthcoming. Matters pertaining to irrigation and postal routes were the two areas where the senator's aid was important. Indeed in the latter area it was crucial.

On June 17, 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt signed into law a bill calling for the reclamation of arid lands in the West. Under its terms the federal government would construct dams and reservoirs for irrigation purposes. Norris was convinced that there was a natural location for a reservoir along the border of Red Willow and Hitchcock counties.<sup>6</sup> He desired to have a dam located there and hoped that the specific site could be agreed upon before election day. He wrote to the secretary of the interior to arouse interest in the plan.

Norris was prompted into action because his opponent, A. C. Shallenberger, claimed that he was the "sole mover and prime originator" of the law and that several projects would soon be located in the district. While Norris doubted his opponent's claims, he nevertheless requested that Senator Dietrich meet with the state engineer and any federal officials who might come to Nebraska and arrange matters so

that Congressman Shallenberger would not have them in tow and thereby reap political advantage from their visit.<sup>7</sup>

The senator responded with a valuable suggestion of his own. He asked Norris to have Republicans in the westernmost counties write letters urging Dietrich to secure the location of artesian wells in these counties. Previously Dietrich had held a long conference with F. H. Newell, chief of the newly organized Bureau of Reclamation. Newell informed him it would be easier to recommend the digging of artesian wells if the people themselves requested it. Dietrich added that it would do Norris "a great deal of good" to let voters know that he was aware of their interests.<sup>8</sup> Thus with Dietrich's help Norris was able to obviate the promises of his opponent.

In this matter Norris was on the defensive, trying to neutralize Shallenberger's claims more than anything else. However, in the case of establishing rural postal routes he was able to press a telling advantage. Early in the campaign Senator Dietrich received requests from two towns in the district asking that he hasten the establishment of proposed rural routes. He relayed these requests to the post office authorities for immediate action. In the meantime, Dietrich thought, Norris might get in touch with these postmasters and have the information go out that he was consulting with Dietrich and soon expected to have the matter satisfactorily disposed of.<sup>9</sup> Here was a political weapon that Shallenberger, a Democrat, could not use, while Norris utilized it very effectively.

Senator Dietrich also sent Norris a letter containing two lists of rural routes in the Fifth Congressional District. One list contained routes that had been favorably recommended but were not yet in operation. Norris at his own discretion could tell interested parties that he would consult with Dietrich and insist upon having them put into operation as quickly as possible.

The other list contained routes that had been requested but were not yet inspected and approved. Here, Dietrich suggested, Norris should select those routes he deemed politically beneficial. Then he could inform people that he would urge an early inspection of the proposed rural routes. Through Dietrich's efforts the Post Office Department promised to send a special agent to investigate them. Since these routes had to be approved by officials in Washington, time was of the essence. The routes had to go into operation before election day if Norris were to benefit from the results of having brought them about so quickly.<sup>10</sup>

So impressed was Norris with these vote-getting opportunities that

he went further and asked Dietrich if it would be possible to secure star routes for two communities which had requested them. Dietrich immediately wrote the second assistant postmaster general, who issued an advertisement endorsing one of the routes. The route was scheduled to go into operation several weeks before election day.<sup>11</sup>

Dietrich was also able to report by the end of September that favorable action would be taken on the reports that the special agent was filing from the district. In October he suggested that Norris inform the postmasters that official notification would soon be forthcoming. Becoming bolder as he received this news, Norris began mentioning to voters that if he were a congressman rather than merely a candidate, these routes already would have been in operation. Herein was an advantage, he argued, of having a congressman of the same political persuasion as the president.<sup>12</sup>

Thus through Senator Dietrich's efforts, Norris was able to take advantage of a form of federal "pork" that was unavailable to his opponent. In September he sought a more direct type of aid when he wrote the chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, J. W. Babcock of Wisconsin, for financial assistance. Babcock responded with a thousand-dollar contribution and several thousand copies of speeches by prominent Republicans. But throughout the campaign Norris made no effort to raise money from federal officials (including postmasters) in the district. It was the custom in Nebraska that these people pay assessments to the state committee and he had no desire to interfere with its work.<sup>13</sup>

Valuable though this aid was, Norris still had to campaign throughout the district in order to wrest the congressional seat from Shallenberger, a tireless and able politician. Moreover, Shallenberger brought Champ Clark of Missouri and other Democratic colleagues into the district while Norris was unable to get a prominent out-of-state Republican to speak on his behalf. Shallenberger boasted of the many bills he had introduced and of other important things he was doing in Washington. Norris noted that the bills had died in committee and argued that a Republican congressman supporting a Republican administration, ably led by President Roosevelt, could do more for the people of the Fifth Congressional District. He also explained that Shallenberger, who claimed to represent the farmers of the district, was really a banker in private life. Norris insisted that he knew more about agriculture and farmers' problems than his opponent. Toward the end of the campaign, he challenged Shallenberger to a corn-husking contest to demonstrate who the real "farmer" candidate was.<sup>14</sup>

Norris concentrated his efforts on the more populous eastern end

of the district where he was not widely known and where the large cities, Hastings and Grand Island, were located. Most of his "non-partisan" speeches before gatherings of Odd Fellows and old soldiers in August were in this area, as were a majority of the newly established rural routes. He counted on the support of politicians in the judicial district to turn out the vote while he made himself known elsewhere. Merwin in Beaver City kept Republican newspapers supplied with news about Norris, while his own recently reorganized paper, the Beaver City *Times-Tribune*, loyally supported Norris' cause. However, Norris refused to purchase the support of at least two editors who claimed that they would endorse "the ones who furnished the dough." Fortunately he was able to arrange his judicial duties, with one brief exception, so that he would not hold court until after the election.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, his opponent, "a man of impressive personal appearance, with piercing eyes, handsome features, a fine head set upon an athletic body, and a fine speaking voice," was conducting a relentless campaign.<sup>16</sup> In his speeches he stressed his support of inflationary measures and favored the regulation of trusts. He made much of his sympathy with farmers and of legislative measures designed for their benefit. On the other hand Norris, when discussing national issues, favored reciprocity as well as the protection of the American workingman and the home market. He stood with Roosevelt on the trust question and charged that "Democratic obstructionists" were primarily responsible for their existence. Any indication of his future lack of partisanship could not have been discerned in these campaign speeches. However, his former Populist opponent, Welty, manifested his loss of partisanship by issuing a statement on October 15, 1902, reviewing once again the 1895 election. He observed, "The people know him to be a man whose honesty is unquestioned and whose moral character is unassailable. They will resent as they have done before, regardless of politics, any attempt to injure his fair name or to detract from his well-earned and good reputation." Thus again Norris hoped to benefit from the gradual disintegration that was cracking the alliance between Populists and Democrats. Prosperity, good crops, abundant rainfall, and the careful weaning by politicians of former Republicans out of the fusion fold worked to the advantage of Republican candidates.<sup>17</sup>

After a debate between Norris and Shallenberger at the end of September in Republican City, both candidates and their advisers were so impressed with its possibilities that they agreed to hold a series of five debates commencing October 21. While Norris, unlike Shallenberger, did not have to concern himself with any serious disaf-

fection in party ranks, he was worried lest abundant crops and prosperity, instead of being an asset, boomerang and lead to a disastrous complacency by keeping voters away from the polls. With most farmers behind in their threshing, there was a possibility that on election day, if the weather were good, they would attend to their crops and not to politics.<sup>18</sup>

After the second debate, Norris received an interesting evaluation from a minor Republican officeholder. He commented upon the "masterly way" in which Norris impressed the audience by citing the records of recent Republican administrations. Though the writer was biased, Norris undoubtedly agreed with the validity of his observations:

Of one thing I am certain and that is that he (Shallenberger) was at all times on the defensive, trying to explain his record and at no time willing to tell how he would do or what he is willing to go on record as standing for.<sup>19</sup>

The writer concluded by observing that Shallenberger would have "to talk fast" and discuss pertinent issues, not bills that died in committee, to convince voters that he should serve another term. This letter and others show that Norris followed the administration on all points when he discussed national issues.

Another observer at this debate thought that Norris' presentation was better than Shallenberger's and that he raised enough questions on the "money matter" and "trust proposition" to cause some Populists to question their alliance with the Democrats.<sup>20</sup> Norris, indeed, was well prepared to meet Shallenberger in public debate. While not a flamboyant and emotional orator, as was his opponent, he impressed an audience by sound sense, logic, and familiarity with his subject. He was not an exciting speaker, but he gave the impression of an industrious and capable candidate who as a congressman would fully devote himself to the interests of his constituents. In short, the air of inherent or natural dignity which had aided him in his judicial campaigns served Norris equally well in this campaign.

However, Norris, who was downcast after the first three debates owing to the vocal support manifested for his opponent, lost his dignity and possibly his temper in the last two debates, including the one at McCook. He attacked Shallenberger in a most vindictive way, claiming he was practicing deception by masquerading as a friend of the farmer. He ridiculed Shallenberger and his family banking and business connections and pointed with pride to his own farm back-

ground and ability. It was in this connection that he challenged Shallenberger to a corn husking contest.<sup>21</sup>

On election day, Tuesday, November 4, 1902, the candidates, worn out by campaigning, impatiently awaited the first returns. However, the party organizations still had important jobs to perform. Helpers with wagons provided transportation to the polls; others engaged in last-minute attempts to obtain votes. Farmers busily threshing wheat had to be convinced that it was important for them to quit their fields. George Allen, an astute local politician, predicted that Norris would carry Clay County by two hundred or more votes (Norris' majority in that county was 184) and assured the candidate that though party officials in Lincoln had some doubts about Norris' ability to carry the Fifth Congressional District, he had none.<sup>22</sup> And Allen was correct.

Republican candidates were elected in almost every contest in the 1902 election. Mickey was elected governor by over five thousand votes, while the average Republican majority on the remainder of the state ticket was a little over thirteen thousand. All Republican candidates for Congress were elected, except in the Second District where incumbent David H. Mercer was defeated by Gilbert M. Hitchcock, publisher of the *Omaha World Herald*. In the Fifth District the vote was very close; Norris won with a precarious majority of 181 votes, receiving 14,927 to 14,746 for Shallenberger, Democrat and Populist, and 496 for John D. Stoddard, Prohibitionist.<sup>23</sup>

Once the results were known, pandemonium prevailed among Norris' supporters. "In 1895," wrote one, "you redeemed the Fourteenth Judicial District from Populism. Now you have restored the Fifth Congressional District." While Mickey ran ahead of Norris in most counties, Norris did much better than Morlan had done two years before. Nebraska's United States senators sent a joint congratulatory telegram proclaiming "the complete triumph for Republican principles in Districts heretofore dominated by Fusionists." Nebraska was now fully redeemed from "the Pernicious Principles of Populism and the Foolish Fraud of Fusionism," and Norris played an important role in its redemption.<sup>24</sup>

Norris now had to attend to many details emanating from the campaign. Merwin, who had not put in a bill for his expenses, had to be paid. He informed Norris, "There are several fellows who want something." He asked only one personal favor and that was for a railroad pass for "a tip-top good fellow" who had done some hard work among a colony of farmers.<sup>25</sup>

Another politician informed Norris that he had dealt with an

individual who worked with him in a Bohemian settlement. He gave him the railroad pass Norris sent "and settled with him otherwise." This worker had relied on similar individuals to get out the vote; some he paid at the time and others he promised to pay after the election. His total expenses came to about two hundred dollars and included such items as hiring teams from local livery stables, advertising, hiring a band, and sending telephone messages.<sup>26</sup>

Thus Norris in his first campaign for national office was able to achieve a narrow but impressive victory and become the second Republican to represent the Fifth Congressional District. Improved agricultural conditions, adequate rainfall, and the generally prosperous state of the union helped to lay the groundwork for his victory,<sup>27</sup> as did the gradual weakening of the bonds that had held the Populist-Democratic alliance together. Above this foundation was a superstructure that included the federal aid Senator Dietrich was able to mobilize, adequate financial support from the Republican party, and the personal popularity of President Roosevelt to whose wagon Norris hitched his political star. Finally, the most significant factor was Norris himself—his personal popularity, his ability as a campaigner, his usual appearance of dignified judicial calmness in his black suit, white shirt, and black string tie, plus his devoted supporters who gave unstintingly of their time, energy, and money. Together they helped to eke out the less than two-hundred vote majority. Victory opened new horizons for forty-one-year-old George Norris. It also brought new responsibilities as well as many trivial but politically important details.